

CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND
CONTEMPORARY MORAL
PROBLEMS

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CHAPTER I

Turning the world upside down – and some other tasks for dogmatic Christian ethics

I

When Barth once likened the entrance of Christianity into human life to that of the Commendatore in his beloved Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, it is plain what motivated the comparison.¹ What Barth wanted to stress with this imagery was a theme which lay close to his heart from the beginning of his revolutionary commentary *The Epistle to the Romans* to the final pages of the last volume of the monumental *Church Dogmatics*; it is that the Word of God, Jesus Christ, comes upon history, as it is humanly conceived, as an abrupt and unanticipated word, giving to this history an ending which could not be anticipated or expected, humanly speaking. No inference or induction, be it grounded in philosophy or psychology, in the natural sciences or in historical knowledge, could lead us to anticipate this conclusion to the story of human life. If it is anticipated, it is anticipated only prophetically – which is to say, that it is anticipated as 'unanticipatable' – as by the prophet Isaiah when

¹ When a version of this chapter was given as an inaugural lecture at King's College, London, I was able to take the opportunity to acknowledge an intellectual debt to Professor Basil Mitchell who supervised my doctoral studies and since then has provided unstinting support and encouragement. It is characteristic of his intellectual generosity and integrity that he should continue this support even when his erstwhile pupil has since taken a path somewhat different from the one he has himself mapped out and followed. It is also characteristic of him that he should have taken the trouble to offer a patient critique of this chapter, to which I shall hope to reply with the care it deserves in the further elaboration and defence of this chapter's thesis I shall hope, on another occasion, to provide. I am also grateful to Colin Gunton, Alan Torrance and Francis Watson for comments on an earlier draft and to an audience in the Faculty of Religious Studies at McGill University for questions and discussion.

he declares: 'Thus saith the Lord . . . Remember ye not the former things, neither consider the things of old. Behold, I will do a new thing.' (Isaiah 43: 16 and 18–19 and see 65: 17f.)

It was the newness of this new thing which Barth was seeking to represent when he likened the entrance of Christ into history to the entrance of the Commendatore, and yet it was a far from happy comparison; indeed we might put it more strongly and say that it was a singularly unhappy one, since the Commendatore, with his icy grip, drags the sinful and unrepentant Don Giovanni down to the flames of hell. But God's decisive intervention, his doing a new thing, is not the intervention of an icy hand. 'And he that sat upon the throne' according to John the Divine, 'said, Behold, I make all things new' (Revelation 22: 5). The new thing which God intends and accomplishes is not to be understood, that is to say, without qualification, as a sweeping away of the old, but as its renewal and re-creation. Specifically, God's new deed is not finally directed at human condemnation, but at human liberation, and in the very particular sense that God's action seeks to evoke and evince a newness in the life and action of those who are its object. God does a new thing that humankind may do a new thing. So it is that in the Book of Acts, those who are the first and privileged objects of God's original action, of his doing of a 'new thing', those Christians whose lives have been shaped by the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, are themselves the doers of new things – a fact which is not concealed even from the rabble who denounce the Christians as 'these that have turned the world upside down', who 'do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus' (Acts 17: 6–7).

Though Barth's comparison of Christianity with the entrance of the Commendatore is thus in certain respects somewhat unfortunate, we can hardly suppose that we should set ourselves to teach Barth wisdom on this point. For, in spite of the false note struck on this occasion, Barth's pre-eminence as the most significant of modern moral theologians (and we should give an extremely generous construal to that word 'modern') lies in the very fact that he sought to understand ethics as determined by the relationship between divine and human action of which we

have been speaking.² There is, so Barth claimed, a form of life – a turning ‘the world upside down’ – which corresponds to, and is established by, the action of God. This correspondence of divine and human action is neatly expressed in a formula which was consistently to govern his thought on these matters: ‘Dogmatics itself is ethics; and ethics is also dogmatics.’³ With this slogan, with the insistence that dogmatics is ethics and ethics dogmatics, Barth asserts at one and the same time the essentially ethical significance of the subject matter of dogmatics, and the essentially dogmatic character of the presuppositions of a genuine ethics; he asserts, that is to say, that an account of the action of God is an account of an action to which certain human action properly and necessarily corresponds and by which it is evinced; and, conversely, that an account of good human action properly and necessarily makes reference to the action of God by which it is both evoked and warranted.

According to this way of thinking, the task of Christian ethics lies in the description of human action called forth by the reality of the action of God to which dogmatics bears witness. In understanding itself thus, Christian ethics takes on a form which can be differentiated from that accorded to it in a number of alternative accounts. In section two of this chapter, we follow Barth in making this differentiation. In section three we shall attempt to illustrate the form of dogmatic ethics, as we may term it, not by reference to its theory, but by reference to its practice in relation to a quite specific area of debate. And then in the fourth and fifth sections we shall face and reply to certain objections which may be put to dogmatic ethics, and which can be indicated sufficiently for the moment by wondering what

² The centrality of ethics in Barth’s understanding of Christian doctrine is rightly stressed in two recent and significant treatments of Barth’s thought: John Webster’s *Barth’s Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge, 1995) and Bruce McCormack’s *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (Oxford, 1995), especially 274–80. According to Webster, for example, ‘the *Church Dogmatics* is a work of moral theology as well as a systematics’ (1); more particularly, Barth maintains that ‘a Christianly successful moral ontology must be a depiction of the world of human action as it is enclosed and governed by the creative, redemptive, and sanctifying work of God in Christ, present in the power of the Holy Spirit’ (2).

³ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, r: 2, trans. G. Thomson and H. Knight (Edinburgh, 1956), 793.

account we might give of the tasks of dogmatic ethics, and whether that account will make reference to any tasks other than the one which the critic accusingly reckons to be its sole form of engagement with the world: preaching.

II

Section 36 of the *Church Dogmatics*, ‘Ethics as a Task of the Doctrine of God’, is the *locus classicus* for Barth’s understanding of the nature of Christian ethics (at least on its interpretative side⁴) – or, as the critic would doubtless prefer to say, borrowing Macaulay’s description of Castle Howard, ‘The most perfect specimen of the most vicious style’.

Barth’s account begins from the assertion that it is only in the concept of ‘covenant that the concept of God can itself find completion’.⁵ Why? Because ‘God is not known and is not knowable except in Jesus Christ.’⁶ Hence ‘The Christian doctrine of God cannot have “only” God for its content, but since its object is *this* God it must also have man, to the extent that in Jesus Christ man is made a partner in the covenant decreed and founded by God.’⁷

This covenant or partnership has, however, for the human partner, two aspects, both the election of humankind and its claiming; or, in this order, grace and law.⁸ As Barth puts it:

⁴ I mean to avert to the contrast indicated by Webster when he notes that ‘the relation to itself which the Word of God establishes for its human recipient is not simply noetic, a matter of interpretation, but ethical, a matter of action’ (*Barth’s Ethics of Reconciliation*, 33), and to note that I mean to deal here chiefly with the noetic aspect of the relationship.

⁵ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, trans. G. Bromiley et al. (Edinburgh, 1957), 509.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.* As Webster puts it, ‘Because – and only because – it is an exposition of the statement “God is”, the *Church Dogmatics* is also all along the line an anthropology. For the form of God’s aseity, the chosen path of the divine being, is specified in the history of Jesus Christ; God’s freedom is freedom for fellowship’ (3). As he puts it again, Barth’s work is governed by the ‘inherent twofoldness of the reality with which Christian theology is concerned’ (32). The presence of this theme at the heart of the *Church Dogmatics* gives the lie to the notion that Barth’s lecture of 1956, ‘The Humanity of God’, somehow represents a radical shift in his thinking.

⁸ In Webster’s words, ‘On Barth’s reading, election is a teleological act on the part of God, having as its end the life-act of the creature whom God elects into covenant with himself’; *Barth’s Ethics of Reconciliation*, 49.

The concept of the covenant between God and man concluded in Jesus Christ is not exhausted in the doctrine of the divine election of grace. The election itself and as such demands that it be understood as God's command directed to man; as the sanctification or claiming which comes to elected man from the electing God in the fact that when God turns to Him and gives Himself to him He becomes his Commander.⁹

In other words, 'The truth of the evangelical indicative means that the full stop with which it concludes becomes an exclamation mark. It becomes itself an imperative.'¹⁰ Hence – recalling one side of the slogan we have already cited – 'The doctrine of God must be expressly defined and developed and interpreted as that which it also is at every point, that is to say, *ethics*.'¹¹ To use another formula, 'The one Word of God which is the revelation and work of His grace is also Law';¹² more specifically, 'The summons of the divine predecision, the sanctification which comes on man from all eternity and therefore once and for all in the election of Jesus Christ, is that in all its human questionable-ness and frailty the life of the elect should become its image and repetition and attestation and acknowledgement.'¹³

If, however, Christian ethics understands itself in this highly particular way, how is it to understand its relationship to, and indeed the very existence of, a general definition or conception of ethics? Writing around the time of the publication of volume II: 1 of the *Church Dogmatics* Bonhoeffer gave the following answer to such a question:

The knowledge of good and evil seems to be the aim of all ethical reflection. The first task of Christian ethics is to invalidate this knowledge. In launching this attack on the underlying assumption of all other ethics, Christian ethics stands so completely alone that it becomes questionable whether there is any purpose in speaking of Christian ethics at all. But if one does so notwithstanding, that can only mean that Christian ethics claims to discuss the origin of the whole problem of ethics, and thus professes to be a critique of all ethics simply as ethics.¹⁴

⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 512.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 513.

¹² Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 511.

¹³ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 512.

¹⁴ D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. E. Bethge, trans. N. H. Smith (London, 1955), 3.

Barth's answer has the same contours. The existence of a general conception of ethics confirms, says Barth, the 'truth of the grace of God which as it is addressed to man puts the question of the good with such priority over all others that man cannot evade it and no other question can completely hide or replace it'.¹⁵ And yet as that general conception invites humankind to attempt to answer that question for themselves, 'the general conception of ethics coincides exactly with the conception of sin'.¹⁶ Theological ethics issues no such invitation: 'If dogmatics, if the doctrine of God, is ethics, this means necessarily and decisively that it is the attestation of that *divine* ethics, the attestation of the good of the command issued to Jesus Christ and fulfilled by Him.'¹⁷ Hence, dogmatic ethics can relate to the general conception of ethics only in a way which, 'From the point of view of the general history of ethics',

means an annexation of the kind that took place on the entry of the children of Israel into Palestine. Other peoples had for a long time maintained that they had a very old, if not the oldest, right of domicile in this country. But, according to Josh. 9: 27, they could now at best exist only as hewers of wood and drawers of water. On no account had the Israelites to adopt or take part in their cultus or culture.¹⁸

Why must it relate thus? Just because:

Ethics in the sense of that general conception is something entirely different from what alone the Christian doctrine of God can be as a doctrine of God's command. Whatever form the relationship between the two may take, there can be no question either of a positive recognition of Christian ethics by that conception or of an attachment of Christian ethics to it. Christian ethics cannot be its continuation, development and enrichment. It is not one disputant in debate with others. It is the final word of the original chairman – only discussed, of course, in Christian ethics – which puts an end to the discussion and involves necessarily a choice and separation.¹⁹

Thus when Christian moralists 'enter the field of ethical reflection and interpretation they must not be surprised at the contradiction of the so-called (but only so-called) original inhabitants of this land. They cannot regard them as an authority

¹⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 518.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 518–19.

¹⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 519.

before which they have to exculpate themselves, and to whose arrangements they must in some way conform. The temptation to behave as if they were required or even permitted to do this is one which must be recognised for what it is and avoided.²⁰

What ought to be resisted and avoided is, however, embraced, says Barth, in two common Christian approaches to the question of the relationship between Christian ethics and general ethics. The one approach attempts a synthesis of the two spheres through apologetics, the other opposes a synthesis by seeking to establish a diastasis. Both are to be rejected.

Apologetics is here understood as ‘the attempt to establish and justify the theologico-ethical inquiry within the framework and on the foundation of the presuppositions and methods of non-theological, of general human thinking and language’.²¹ Now, ‘The only possible meaning of this apologetic is a sincere conviction that theological ethics must be measured against a general ethics.’ To this Barth responds:

[W]hat can be legitimated in this way, what can be indicated as included in the content of a general ethical enquiry and reply, is certainly not the distinctively theological enquiry and reply in which we have to do with the grace of God in the issuing and fulfilling of His command. The ethical bent of the religious self-consciousness, a ‘value attitude’ and the like, may be justified in this way, but not the attestation of the commandment of God as the form of his grace. This theme is automatically lost when apology succeeds. For the man who – as a philosopher, perhaps, or even as a politician – thinks that he knows a general principle which is actually superior to the origin and aim of theologico-ethical enquiry and reply, and who in the matter of the doctrine of God thinks that he can actually step forward as judge in the question of truth, a theological ethic with its Whence? and

²⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 520.

²¹ *Ibid.* I have here amended the English translation which renders ‘allgemein menschlichen Denkens’ as ‘wholly human thinking’; ‘general’ or ‘prevailing’ is the proper reading and some pages later (534) ‘general human thought’ is given as the translation of the same German expression. This amendment is important since the expression ‘wholly human thinking’ creates a difficulty on two fronts. In the first place, though Barth will maintain that Thomism is finally apologetic, he would not describe its conception of ethics as of ethics as being based on ‘wholly human thinking’. In the second place, the claim that theological ethics can often be ‘comprehensive’ in relation to general ethics makes sense only if general ethics itself is not ‘wholly human’, but, even if unwittingly, witnesses to the reality of God. The translators have made Barth’s position somewhat more stark than it really is.

Whither? will necessarily be an objectionable undertaking, which he will regard either as insignificant or even perhaps as dangerous. And theological ethics on its part will cease to be what it is, if it dares to free itself from this offensiveness, if it dares to submit to a general principle, to let itself be measured by it and adjusted to it.²²

This refusal of apologetics does not imply for Barth – and this will be important later on – a refusal to engage with general ethics. Whilst theological ethics must maintain that ‘the command of God is not founded on any other command, and cannot therefore be derived from any other, or measured by any other, or have its validity tested by any other’,²³ it can and must, ‘Without detriment to its loyalty to its own task, indeed, in its very loyalty to it in this aspect too . . . establish a continuous relationship of its thinking and speaking with the human ethical problem as a whole.’²⁴ Why? Because it knows that ‘finally and properly its own Whence? and Whither? are not alien to any philosophic moralist . . . but regards and addresses him unswervingly on the basis that grace, and therefore the command of God, affects him too’.²⁵ Just because this is so, it can even be said that theological ethics ‘will be absolutely open to all that it can learn from general human ethical enquiry and reply’, even while it declines to ‘set up general ethics as a judge’ over itself.²⁶

The temptation to regard general ethics as an authority before which theological ethicists ‘have to exculpate themselves, and to whose arrangements they must in some way conform’ is acceded to not only in the attempt at an apologetics which would dissolve theological ethics, but also in ‘the attempt . . . to show that, whatever may be the interconnexion between them, there is a twofold ethical inquiry, . . . a “theological” and a “philosophical”, which touch and limit but do not abolish each other’²⁷ – a strategy motivated perhaps by a realisation of the redundancy which theological ethics has wished on itself by apologetics. Thus it might be reckoned that theological ethics has a special and particular source, subject, presupposition or

²² Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 521–2.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 524.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

content which gives it a task in addition to, but not at odds with, philosophical ethics. This is not synthesis then, as attempted by apologetics, but diastasis, the ‘friendly demarcation’ of two spheres; but ‘it is no less suspect’ than the former.²⁸ ‘What we have to ask in relation to this view is whether theology can seriously contemplate two things’, a sphere determined by revelation, grace and so on, and another by reason, experience, and the like.²⁹ Or, ‘to put the question differently’:

Is God’s revelation of the truth, or is it only the source of certain religious ideas and obligations, alongside which there are very different ones in other spheres? Outside and alongside the kingdom of Jesus Christ are there other respectable kingdoms? Can and should theology of all things be content to speak, not with universal validity, but only esoterically? Is it, or is it not, serious in its alleged knowledge of a Whence? and Whither? of all ethical enquiry and reply which are superior to all reason, experience and self-determination? If it is serious about this, how can it, even if only for a moment, take seriously and accept the validity of an ethics which necessarily lacks or even disavows this knowledge? How can it liberate this ethics, as it were, by entering into an armistice with it? How can it imagine that it can secure its own right to exist in this way? Does it really believe in its own theme if it concedes that the other ethics has its own source and subject in reason, experience and self-determination? – as if all this did not lie from the very outset in its own sphere, the sphere of theological ethics; as if it could be right to accept all these quantities as self-evident, to concede autonomy to man’s knowledge of good and evil; as if Jesus Christ had not died and risen again; as if we could salute the grace of God, as it were, and then go our own way; as if it were the task of theology positively to encourage and invite people to do this by the establishment of this diastasis.³⁰

Theological ethics cannot tolerate the establishment of such diastasis and, for this very reason, far from detaching itself from other ethics, it takes up ‘the legitimate problems and concerns and motives and assertions of every other ethics . . . after testing them in the light of its own superior principles’.³¹ Hence, ‘its attitude to every other ethics is not negative but comprehensive’ in so far as such ethics is aware of, or attests to,

²⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 525.

²⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 526.

³¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 527.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

explicitly or implicitly, 'its origin and basis in God's command'; it is exclusive only as 'it [i.e., other ethics] tries to deny or obscure its derivation from God's command'.³²

On the one side, therefore, it absorbs it into itself, and on the other it opposes it . . . Either way, it necessarily accepts full responsibility for handling the whole problem of ethics – and not merely of an esoteric ethics which appeals to special sources and proceeds according to a special method, but of ethics generally and as such.³³

The 'Roman Catholic view of the matter' can be treated, at least initially, as a 'third possible way of defining the relationship between theological ethics and other ethics' and as one which seems to avoid the pitfalls of these others: 'we certainly cannot accuse it directly of either surrender of theology to the authority and judgment of principles alien to it, or escaping into the narrow confines of a special theological task'.³⁴ Indeed, in its understanding of the co-ordination of moral theology and moral philosophy, it seems properly to relate the two disciplines – the two are certainly not the same, but neither can they be separated nor proceed in essentially opposed directions:

Does it not maintain that the knowledge of God must necessarily be one and the same ultimate presupposition not only of theological but of all ethics? Is it not shown that theological ethics – deriving like every other ethics from this ultimate knowledge, but drawing incomparably much more illumination from it – cannot possibly allow this other ethics to put and answer the question of truth, as though it were an exercise set and corrected by it? Could it not give us the necessary irenic and polemic – the claiming and acknowledging of other ethics in respect of the remnants of that presupposition still to be found in them, and the rejection of all other ethics in so far as they do not know or indeed deny this presupposition? At a first glance we may even be tempted to regard this solution as ideal.³⁵

And yet on reflection it cannot be so regarded, for 'within this framework the command of the grace of God as the content

³² Ibid. For Barth's understanding of the comprehensiveness of Christian ethics, see his treatment of the doctrine of creation, and in particular the discussion of anthropology, *Church Dogmatics*, III, 2, trans. H. Knight et al. (Edinburgh, 1960), esp. section 44.

³³ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 527–8.

³⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 528.

³⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 529.

of theological ethics cannot have the status which properly belongs to it':

For this Roman Catholic co-ordination of moral philosophy and moral theology is based on the basic view of the harmony which is achieved in the concept of being between nature and super-nature, reason and revelation, man and God. And it is quite impossible to see how in this basic view grace can really emerge as grace and the command as command.³⁶

Grace cannot emerge as grace because 'grace which has from the start to share its power with a force of nature is no longer grace';³⁷ and the command cannot emerge as a command because 'if obligation is grounded in being, this undoubtedly means that it is not grounded in itself, but ontically subordinated to another, and noetically to be derived from this other. It is imperative only in virtue of that which is over it; and it becomes imperative for us only in virtue of its derivation from it'.³⁸ But this is not how it is with the God with whom Christian dogmatics is concerned.

[W]hat has that metaphysics of being to do with the God who is the basis and Lord of the Church? If this God is He who in Jesus Christ became man, revealing Himself and reconciling the world with Himself, it follows that the relationship between Him and man consists in the event in which God accepted man out of pure, free compassion, in which He drew him to Himself out of pure kindness, but first and last in the eternal decree of the covenant of grace, in God's eternal predestination. It is not with the theory of the relationship between creaturely and creative being, but with the theory of this divine praxis, with the consideration and conception of this divine act, of its eternal decree and its temporal execution, that theology and therefore theological ethics, must deal.³⁹

It turns out, then, that the avoidance of pitfalls of the 'apologetic and differentiating movements of the theological ethics of Neo-Protestantism' is more apparent than real. The 'gross blunders of apologetics and isolationism' are not evident 'only because they are in some sense committed in principle,

³⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 530.

³⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 531.

³⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 532.

³⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 531.

and therefore do not need to be committed in particular'.⁴⁰ That is to say, Roman Catholicism is:

the wisest of all mediating systems because it is apologetic from the very outset in its understanding of grace and revelation and God, i.e., because it is an establishment and justification of the Christian position before the forum of general human thought, and accomplishes the fatal assimilation of the Christian to the human. But it is also the wisest because, without any inner conflict, it works with that division of roles, and in this way safeguards its task as theological ethics, although obviously rendering it innocuous.⁴¹

Hence, though Roman Catholicism does classically what in neo-Protestantism is only 'epigonous' (i.e., a less distinguished imitation of an earlier and more illustrious practice), the former is no more satisfactory than the latter.⁴²

Theological ethics must, then, maintain the distinctiveness which belongs to it in virtue of its having its source in 'a knowledge of the God who elects man'.⁴³ It must, that is to say, be an ethics which understands its task as 'a task of the doctrine

⁴⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 534.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Barth's treatment of Roman Catholic ethics, here meaning the ethics of Thomism, plainly depends on wider theological questions and its adequacy can hardly be settled within the ambit of this chapter – this point must be stressed. It can be said, however, that study of a recent attempt to restate and defend the main lines of a Thomist ethics shows only too well the relevance of the critique. S. Pinckaer's *Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. from the 3rd edn by M. Noble (Edinburgh, 1995), seeks to save Thomas from what is reckoned to be the misinterpretation of the casuists, for whom his treatise on the natural law is central. According to Pinckaers, however, Thomas's treatment of the natural law must be read only in the context of his treatment of human happiness as finding its end in God, and of the virtues as shaped by this end and as nourished by grace. Read thus, we find that the leading category in Thomas's moral theology is not the category of obligation, but the category of freedom; Thomas, that is to say, preaches a Gospel of the liberation of the human subject through the action of God. But, even when Thomas is construed as avoiding the blatant 'blunders' of apologetics and diastasis, to use Barth's terms, the question which Barth poses is highly pertinent: are not these blunders evident below the surface? When we find that theological ethics is treated as a deepening of human wisdom, on the basis of an anthropology and doctrine of God which permits such co-ordination, what is this but the classic assimilation and division of Roman Catholic ethics? And the matter of the plausibility of this co-ordination is sharply brought to our attention by the claim that 'the natural inclination to marriage is universal' (447); for what does this suggest but a readiness to ignore the particularities not only of theology but also of the wisdom it is held to augment, and to do so on the basis of some a priori and barely acknowledged account of the compatibility of moral theology and moral philosophy?

⁴³ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 535.

of God', and thereby as determined by the fact that "what is good" has been "said" to man (Micah, 6: 8).⁴⁴ Thus determined, 'the ethical problem of Church dogmatics can consist only in the question whether and to what extent human action is a glorification of the grace of Jesus Christ . . . It asks about the action of the man who is actually placed in the light of grace.'⁴⁵

'The act of the God who in grace has elected man for the covenant with Himself' and who thereby claims the actions of humankind, can, however, be characterised in the 'shortest possible form' as an act of creation, reconciliation and redemption.⁴⁶ Hence, the one command of God by which humans are claimed can itself be understood in threefold form as 'the command of God the Creator, the command of God the Reconciler and the command of God the Redeemer'.⁴⁷ Thus it belongs to theological ethics to 'explain and recapitulate in their ethical content' the 'fundamental concepts of dogmatics'.⁴⁸ In the completion of this task lies the chief concern of a dogmatic ethics.

III

Where Christian ethics understands itself as dogmatic ethics – that is, as providing an account of human action as it corresponds to the reality of the action of God – it necessarily understands itself in such a way as to differentiate itself from a number of other accounts of ethics, even when those are given from the Christian side. In the previous section we followed Barth in his attempt to make this theoretical differentiation. Now, however, we shall seek to understand this differentiation not from the side of theory, but from the side of practice.

We could, of course, attempt once more to follow the path taken by Barth, and certainly the early lectures published as *Ethics*, volume III: 4 of the *Church Dogmatics* (a consideration of our being as God's creatures) and the fragment of IV: 4 which

⁴⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 537.

⁴⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 540.

⁴⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 549.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

appears as *The Christian Life* (the unfinished development of the theme of human being as the being of pardoned sinners), provide richly suggestive treatments of what Barth terms 'special ethics'.⁴⁹ It seems better, however, to follow a different route at this point for a number of reasons. In the first place, for all its undoubted richness, Barth's uncompleted treatment of special ethics requires that we must, to some extent, engage in a task of sympathetic reconstruction before attempting either appropriation or critique.⁵⁰ More importantly it may more effectively serve our purpose to characterise the practice of dogmatic ethics, at least to begin with, by offering not a eulogy on a position with which it shares common ground, but by offering a modest critique of one with which it may be confused but from which it in actual fact differs. Having made this distinction we may then turn to two specific examples of the practice which we mean to commend.

Amongst contemporary positions in the field of Christian ethics there are, to be sure, a good number from which dogmatic ethics will be distinguished with an ease (though not without attention to the details of the matter) which reassures us that there is little risk of confusion. Plainly, it should be distinguished from the intellectually highly vigorous critiques and developments of Thomism associated with Grisez and Finnis on the one hand, and with MacIntyre on the other.⁵¹ (This is not to say that there is nothing to be learnt from these projects, pursued as they are with philosophical rigour and, in the first case, theological seriousness, but only that in their

⁴⁹ K. Barth, *Ethics*, ed. D. Braun, trans. G. Bromiley (Edinburgh, 1981) and *The Christian Life*, trans. G. Bromiley (Edinburgh, 1981).

⁵⁰ N. Biggar's study *The Hastening that Waits: Karl Barth's Ethics* (Oxford, 1993), provides a careful and critical delineation of the form which Barth's ethics might be supposed to have taken had the *Church Dogmatics* been completed.

⁵¹ For the first see especially G. Grisez's important study *The Way of the Lord Jesus* – of which three volumes have thus far appeared, *Christian Moral Principles* (Chicago, 1983), *Living a Christian Moral Life* (Quincy, IL, 1993), and *Difficult Moral Questions* (Quincy, IL, 1997) – and J. Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford, 1980) and *Moral Absolutes: Tradition, Revision, and Truth* (Washington, 1991). For MacIntyre's developing position, see *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd edn (London, 1985), *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London, 1988), *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (London, 1990), and 'Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification' in *Moral Truth and Moral Tradition*, ed. L. Gormally (Dublin, 1994), 6–24.

broad lines these projects do not understand themselves, and cannot be understood, as exercises in dogmatic ethics as we have delineated it.) Furthermore, dogmatic ethics can be distinguished from the intellectually far from vigorous body of broadly neo-Protestant writing which doubtless reckons itself a contribution to the work of Christian ethics though without having anything but the vaguest idea of what it might be to make such a contribution. If it betrays even a hint of anything approaching methodological self-consciousness, it is unlikely to rise far above the maxim chosen by a certain theologian to sum up the theme of a chapter on ethics: 'The sense of God's presence, which is the crown of the religious life, reaches over into the sphere of ethics and glorifies it.'⁵² (Surveying this body of material, we can hardly fail to note that the contemporary Christian moralist, afflicted by a certain methodological whimsicality, often resembles the extremely genial and well-liked Prince Oblonsky of *Anna Karenina*, whose 'tendencies and opinions' says Tolstoi, 'were not his by deliberate choice: they came of themselves, just as he did not choose the fashion of his hats and coats, but wore those of the current style'. But the survey will also have to note an added layer of pathos, or better, bathos – for when the self-professed Christian ethicist who has learnt his ethics from the world returns to the world from writing his most recent book or paper on some aspect of Christian ethics, he finds to his great satisfaction that he can congratulate himself and his colleagues on the quite remarkable influence they have exerted over contemporary life and thought, quite oblivious to the fact that the world's agreement with him is in reality founded on his agreement with the world. How else should we explain finding one such – hence the male pronoun in the last sentence – describing Christian ethics as having been 'remarkably successful' over the last twenty years?)

It is easy enough to distinguish the practice of dogmatic ethics from the practice of those who quite consciously, or rather unselfconsciously, are set on a different path. But it must also be distinguished, and with some care, from an approach –

⁵² J. Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, revised edn (London, 1977), 503, quoting W. Adams Brown, *Christian Theology in Outline*.

that of Stanley Hauerwas – with which it shares many concerns while doubting the adequacy of its practice. To be precise, we must ask of Hauerwas whether or not he is sufficiently dogmatic – an enquiry on which Hauerwas may be able to smile in so far as it represents questioning from a position which is ready to learn from the major themes of his work and which, with him, finds little of merit (as we shall see in the next section) in the complaints of the majority of his critics!

A recent collection of Hauerwas's papers, which may be taken as representative of Hauerwas's position, has a title which hints at something of the commonality between his concerns and those of dogmatic ethics: *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular*.⁵³ Hauerwas, that is to say, characteristically and consistently seeks a theological engagement with the secular; that is, he seeks an unapologetic portrayal of the 'world envisioned in Christian discourse',⁵⁴ with all the difference between this world and the secular world in relation to issues of war, medical practice, the treatment of the mentally handicapped and so on. But, as this theme of difference and distinctiveness is developed, through Hauerwas's characteristic and important reflections on narrative, the Church and the virtues, a question begins to take form as to whether the 'world envisioned in Christian discourse' is properly conceived and thus the difference truly displayed.

Take to begin with an essay entitled 'Creation as Apocalyptic'. Here Hauerwas insists that 'the nonapocalyptic vision of reality that dominates American public life tempts American Christians, like other Americans, to accept, with despair and relief, the inevitability and thus the goodness of things as they are'.⁵⁵ Thus it is no surprise to find Hauerwas warning that 'appeals to creation too often amount to legitimating strategies for the principalities and powers that determine our lives'⁵⁶ – since forgetfulness of apocalyptic is also forgetfulness of the Fall,

⁵³ S. Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular* (Durham, NC, 1994).

⁵⁴ Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front*, 7.

⁵⁵ Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front*, 114.

⁵⁶ Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front*, 111.

a nonapocalyptic vision is likely to lead to appeals to creation which do indeed ‘often amount to legitimating strategies’ by which Christians simply come to terms with what is the case; strategies, that is to say, which take from our lips the prayer ‘hallowed be thy name’, by which we ask that God would bring to an end the twilight of good and evil in which we presently live. Notoriously, the Lutheran handling of the notion of the orders of creation (particularly in the work of Gogarten, for example) is held to be susceptible to just such a charge, and even in Bonhoeffer’s self-conscious re-interpretation of this notion in his treatment of ‘mandates’, Barth wonders whether there is not a ‘suggestion of north German patriarchalism’.⁵⁷ Examples could be multiplied (and readily gleaned, for example, from the teachings of Augustine’s Pelagian opponents in relation to matters of human sexuality, as we shall presently see), but this is hardly to the point. To say that appeals to creation ‘too often’ amount to legitimating strategies surely suggests that there is no necessity here. Can there not be, we must ask, a corrected account of creation; i.e., one which does not crassly identify what is the case with God’s will for the world? Is it not on the basis of just such a possibility that Augustine, to mention that example again, endeavours to treat of human sexuality, and Barth, more broadly, of anthropology? And, if that possibility does not lie open to us, if we cannot with them envision the world which lies behind the Fall, are we not destined to find ourselves incapable of anything other than, on the one hand, a polemical protest at what is, and, on the other, a somewhat inarticulate hope for what shall be?

In an essay entitled, ‘Killing Compassion’, Hauerwas seems explicitly to rule out such a possibility – or at least, not to take it seriously – with his rather quick criticisms of Oliver O’Donovan’s *Resurrection and Moral Order*. ‘O’Donovan’, he claims:

seeks an account of natural law which is not governed by the eschatological witness of Christ’s resurrection. We cannot write about *Resurrection and Moral Order* because any order that we know as Christians is resurrection. I am not denying that we are creatures of a good creator; I am simply suggesting that as Christians we know

⁵⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III: 4, 22.

nothing about what we mean by creation separate from the new order we find through the concrete practices of baptism and Eucharist, correlative as they are to Christ's resurrection.⁵⁸

Hauerwas's point here is difficult to fathom. O'Donovan is said to be looking for 'an account of natural law which is not governed by the eschatological witness of Christ's resurrection.' But, as Hauerwas knows very well, O'Donovan is committed to a thoroughly Christian and Christological epistemology, and thus takes the resurrection to be the key to our knowledge of the created order – hence the title of his book. Far from being ungoverned by the eschatological witness of Christ's resurrection, then, knowledge of creation is knowledge of a beginning which is found only in knowledge of the end. So, for example, we find O'Donovan saying that:

the creation was given to us with its own goal and purpose, so that the outcome of the world's story cannot be a cyclical return to the beginnings, but must fulfil that purpose in the freeing of creation from its 'futility' . . . Thus there is an important place in Christian thought for the idea of 'history', using the term as it is widely used in philosophy and theology to mean, not mere events on the one hand, nor their narration in an intelligible story on the other, but their inherent significance and direction which makes them intelligible and narratable. The Christian understanding of this idea is, of course, only to be reached through a Christian understanding of the end towards which events are directed, that is, through eschatology.⁵⁹

Since O'Donovan understands creation from its purpose, and understands that purpose from what is disclosed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, he is not guilty of separating creation from eschatology, as Hauerwas charges, but seeks to allow the latter to interpret the former. In this, of course, he conforms to the practice of, to take one of the examples already mentioned, Karl Barth in his working out of a doctrine of creation in general, and of humankind in particular. In that latter case, Barth proposes, as is well known, to understand anthropology from Christology, thus turning the nineteenth century's attempt to found Christology on anthropology

⁵⁸ Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front*, 175.

⁵⁹ O. M. T. O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order* (Leicester, 1986), 55.

on its head. But to mention the example of Barth's anthropology and the attempt to understand the creation as itself inherently eschatologically ordered is to bring to the fore, perhaps more clearly, a point already made, namely that there is no reason to suppose that appeals to creation should be identified with strategies for legitimating the twilight world of good and evil against which Hauerwas properly protests; in Barth's hands, for example, an eschatologically conditioned doctrine of creation provides the very grounds on which he seeks to challenge Nietzsche's anthropology of the *übermensch*, of the 'I am' without and against the other, an anthropology which, as Barth sees it, expresses the *telos* of the modern conception of humanity.⁶⁰

Hauerwas's charge against O'Donovan, and his blanket suspicion of appeals to the created order, are both misplaced; there is, however, a charge which relates to his own work which he needs to address. If O'Donovan is said to seek 'an account of natural law which is not governed by the eschatological witness of Christ's resurrection', might we not counter-charge that Hauerwas seems to seek an account of the eschaton which is not governed by the belief in creation which he avows? Might we not even be tempted to say of Hauerwas what has been said of Moltmann: that here God is present to the world solely as future, and thus in such a way that that presence cannot be understood as an expression of his faithfulness?⁶¹ Is this not an instance, in a phrase of von Balthasar's, of 'an Omega that has no Alpha'. Or to put it another way – ought we not to remind ourselves that it is Augustine's willingness to attempt the discernment of the goodness of the created order (an order which is, after all, not overlooked in salvation, but is its object) which gives proof of the distance he places between his Christian present and his Manichee past? Can we not ask, that is to say, whether a fuller account of Christian life and witness than Hauerwas has thus far given, and one more dogmatically

⁶⁰ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III: 2, section 45, esp. 231–42.

⁶¹ See, e.g., D. Schuurman, *Creation, Eschaton, and Ethics: The Ethical Significance of the Creation–Eschaton Relation in the Thought of Emil Brunner and Jürgen Moltmann* (New York, 1991).

determined than his thought seems to be, would make reference not only to moments of protest and expectation, but also to moments of joy, celebration and acceptance?

It is important to stress that the point which we are making is not one which is found amidst the many criticisms of Hauerwas which Gustafson scatters with a certain abandon when he contends that 'Nature is . . . of no ethical significance as a source of direction in Hauerwas's ethics. Hauerwas becomes a twentieth-century version of Marcion.'⁶² Gustafson demands that an understanding of nature should serve to govern theology; we demand of Hauerwas that theology should serve to govern our understanding of nature. The general complaint we make against Hauerwas is, in other words, that his ethics is insufficiently dogmatic.⁶³

Having attempted to distinguish dogmatic ethics from a practice which does not fully conform to its sense of what is required, but with which it may be confused, we must now venture to give a better example of its practice. It will be

⁶² J. Gustafson, 'A Response to Critics', *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 13 (1985), 191.

⁶³ We might note that this is criticism which is relevant to the work of certain members of what we might term the 'school of Hauerwas'; V. Guroian's *Ethics After Christendom: Toward an Ecclesial Christian Ethic* (Grand Rapids, 1994), provides an example. When Guroian tells us that 'liturgy is a primary context and source for Christian ethics' (7), we can hardly fail to wonder whether the properly dogmatic basis of ethics is here maintained. To say that liturgy is a primary context for Christian ethics is one thing; after all, the indefinite article qualifies the claim somewhat, and what remains is, given Guroian's explication, surely acceptable: the liturgy serves to frame, interpret and articulate the Christian understanding of God's salvific action so that in the liturgy we discern the character of the action called forth from us by that original action. But what can it mean to say that liturgy is a 'source for Christian ethics', or for that matter to speak of 'liturgical theology'? Certainly, as we have said, liturgy in general, and the lectionary in particular, presents an interpretation of the story of salvation and thus of the human action appropriate as a response to it; but this does not make liturgy a source of Christian ethic in any interesting sense. Indeed, most of the time Guroian is careful to avoid any such claim; thus he concludes his essay 'The Bible in Orthodox Ethics' by saying that it has attempted to show 'that the Orthodox tradition possesses a rich treasury of liturgies and rites in which the biblical world with its images is powerfully narrated, enacted, and embodied communally' (80). Plainly the liturgy cannot be the source of what it narrates, enacts and embodies. Its role in relation to this source is heuristic, and only confusion about the nature of 'an ecclesial Christian ethic' can result unless this point is maintained with a certain definiteness and clarity. Guroian then, needs to focus on what lies behind – and what lies behind is the biblical world to which dogmatics is responsible, and by which our liturgies, whether Orthodox, Anglican, Roman Catholic, or whatever, must ultimately be judged.